

Carinivorous Bananas

There's something about dogs eating bananas that's all wrong. Like cows eating their own placenta after they've calved. It's obscene. As kids we had a scraggle of cats that ate pumpkin peelings, but only because there were about a hundred of them and they were always so hungry they ate anything. These dogs are as well-conditioned as any and have no right being vegetarian. Yet there they are sitting on their haunches begging, if you please, for lumps of banana. Go on, mate, sling us a bit, willya?

Mind you they are good bananas, I have to admit that. The best I've ever tasted, in fact. And I've had them from all over. The sweetest from Carnarvon and Coffs Harbour, grown at similar latitudes on opposite coasts, and from the Top End of the Northern Territory. And of course the North Queensland supermarket banana, compromised a little on taste but doing the job of feeding the country. But these bananas the dogs are eating are on another level again. And the main reason they are superior, I suspect, is because they eat cane toads. The plants do. Not the bananas. Or the dogs. The dogs eat the bananas, the plants eat the cane toads. Got it?

Okay, here's the story. In Yirrkala in north east Arnhem Land is a banana plantation that was set up by the Methodist missionaries in the 1960s.

"In those days people were fairly enthusiastic," the current plantation manager tells me. "There were lots of women worked here and chipped away at weeds all day."

"Yolngu¹?"

"Yolngu workers, yeah. And the mission people were often Fijian or Tongan, agriculturalists." He nods almost imperceptibly to emphasise the point; he's not one for grand gestures. "Then the local church kept the farm going after the mission pulled out in the 70s," he continues, "then Yirrkala Dhanbul took over in 2003. And it's currently run by Bunuwal Industrial, which is an Aboriginal company that employs Aboriginal people."

"Is it more difficult to employ Aboriginal people since the Intervention²?"

¹ The indigenous people of north east Arnhem Land.

² In short, The 2007 Federal Government's controversial National Emergency Response to the dire state of Aboriginal living conditions in the Northern Territory, which divided public opinion with its radical changes to welfare, land tenure and the permit system among other elements of Aboriginal living in the Territory. It was a bi-partisan agreement and the Intervention was adopted by the incoming Labour Government, but in the recent words of its original architect, ex-Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, "It has become stagnant and buried

"Yeah the CDEP³ program isn't as flexible as it used to be, and it's not conducive to people working in places like this. It's mostly unemployment now, I think."

He's too polite to go any further. He's been running the farm for 20 years and seen the indigenous work initiatives come and go. But at the risk of oversimplifying, tinkering with the CDEP scheme by both sides of government (beginning with the Howard Government's Intervention in 2007) seems to have achieved little more than put more people on welfare. Where the old CDEP provided real employment opportunities for people in remote communities in particular, the current model tends to offer no incentive to work because it pays about the same as the dole - so why would you? - and it's equally discouraging for many employers because the allowable 17.5 hours doesn't give them enough time to get the job done.

So these days the plantation manager runs the 15 acres of bananas without permanent staff. For anything labour-intensive he enlists "a bunch of Yolngu that work quite well" from the Bunuwal Industrial Grounds Maintenance crew. But most of the day-to-day running he manages with his wife, who helps with "pretty much everything", and his teenage daughter, who helps catch the cane toads they feed to the plants. Which brings us back to *Bufo marinus*.

"So why the cane toads?" I ask the manager.

"Panama Disease," he answers simply. "Tropical race number 4."

In short, Panama disease is the scourge of the banana industry worldwide. It is a fungus that enters the plant through the roots and cuts off supply. There are four different races affecting every commercial variety known to the industry. Tropical race 4 attacks the dominant Cavendish variety and to date has been confined to the Northern Territory (and some Asian countries), but there's a very real threat it will spread to Western Australia and Queensland. It cannot be eradicated and once a plantation has been affected it's only a matter of time before production stops. The manager points out the wilting leaves of an affected plant, then fells it with one blow of his machete and shows me the tell-tale brown spots in the cut of the stem.

in bureaucracy. It is no longer working." To which statement we must add the qualifier that we never saw Brough's original vision working either, whether because there wasn't time or it was also flawed is a matter of opinion.

³ Community Development Employment Project implemented by the Fraser Government in 1977, to address the high indigenous unemployment levels resulting from the Whitlam Government's decision to grant award wages to Aboriginals. Put bluntly, when Aboriginals were given equal standing in the workplace they were no longer as attractive to their main employers, namely the pastoralists, so they became unemployed.

"So you use the cane toads as fertiliser?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to improve the soil health, and that way increase the bananas' resistance to getting the pathogens."

"How did you come up with the idea of cane toads?"

"They're readily available. And they're also a problem in that they eat worms, and if you can increase the worm population in your soil they spread the nutrients around and produce their own fertiliser. But if you've got cane toads eating them all night it decreases the fertility of the soil."

So he and his daughter trap toads in wire mesh cages baited with fluorescent lights (to attract the insects, which in turn attract the toads) and make mulch from the carcasses. He takes me to see his mulching plant. At first glance it's clearly a work of art. He's got an old farm ute chocked up on its own back wheels, with the rear axle driving a series of gears and shafts rigged up to a cement mixing bowl. At some stage the bowl has been painted pink, but now there's a fetching brown splash staining one side, perfectly replicated in two halves like a kiddies' symmetrical art painting. How it got there I didn't ask, but when he starts the ute and gets the bowl turning it looks like part of a set from a 1970s psychedelic theatre production. I think my observation was, "She's out there, baby."

"Yeah, we mix them in there with some cardboard boxes and a bit of anything we can find, leaves or banana waste, fish carcasses, and it comes out in about ten days and it's quite a nice compost."

I like the way he refers to it like you might refer to a cake fresh from the oven, even though it stinks like a dead cow.

"I've been away and it hasn't turned over for a few days," he apologises. "But if I turn it over three times a day it keeps it aerobic and it doesn't smell, there's no flies."

"And do you see a difference?"

"Yeah, I've experimented with blocks of paw paws, and the ones that have had the cane toads have fruited earlier, and they've been a lot healthier plants."

As well as bananas he also tends a small orchard of red paw paws and limes, about the most exquisite tropical fruit combination I can imagine and again the

best I've ever sampled. Though he admits diversifying won't prolong his stay. The needs of the local market are easily met with the plantings he already has, and freight makes the export market cost-ineffective.

Likewise he knows the cane toad mulch is too labour-intensive to be a serious defense against Panama Disease on any commercial scale, even if improving the soil health *does* make a difference.

"It'd probably be cheaper to set up somewhere else, but there's nowhere else around here to go, so we've got to look after this bit of country as best we can."

"So really once the bananas go, your job here is done."

"Yeah," he nods. "Unless they come up with a new variety of banana that's resistant to it that we can plant out."

Which would be a great shame. Not only because we'd lose a delicious strain of banana, but what would those dogs eat? While we've been hooning around the property in the manager's golf buggy the dogs have been tagging along. There's three of them. The largest is a brown Doberman called Rocky. The next down is a tail-less blue dog called Clyde. And Midge is a little brown and white fox terrier cross. And they all eat bananas. Rocky even picks his own, then brings it to be peeled and tossed in sections into the three waiting mouths. As the manager says, "They know a good banana when they see one."